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ABSTRACT

Beginning with the class of 2003, all Massachusetts students must pass the state's high stakes test, MCAS, in order to graduate, which may significantly affect Massachusetts' already high dropout rate. According to this MCAS Alert, instead of remedying the problem of students who graduate without skills, this policy threatens to push the most vulnerable students out of school. Higher dropout rates are predictable consequences of high stakes testing. Currently, African American, Hispanic, and urban students are dramatically over-represented among dropouts. Faced with failing MCAS scores, many good students begin to doubt their academic ability and ability to graduate. Research indicates that high stakes testing can actually undermine student motivation. Student interviews suggest that MCAS is as likely to drive them away from school as to motivate them. Despite foreseeable increases in dropout rates, the Massachusetts DOE has not taken any steps to anticipate, monitor, and address the impact of MCAS on dropout problems. The state should immediately: suspend the policy of linking MCAS scores to graduation; renew its commitment to dropout prevention; and begin working with local districts and professional associations to design a multifaceted assessment system to improve learning for all students. Sidebars present the predictable push-out consequences of high stakes testing and Massachusetts districts to watch. (SM)

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MCAS ALERT
MCAS: MAKING THE MASSACHUSETTS DROPOUT CRISIS WORSE

FairTest/CARE (Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education)
September 2000

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MCAS Alert

FairTest / CARE (Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education) *September 2000*

MCAS: Making the Massachusetts Dropout Crisis Worse

"I think a lot of people are going to drop out if they fail this test. If they feel they're not going to make it to college, why bother trying?"
- Lacy Langevin, New Bedford High School, Class of 2003

"We'll have a graduating class of 10."
- Crissy Rodrigues, New Bedford High School, Class of 2003

A cloud hangs over many Massachusetts students. Beginning with the Class of 2003, all students must pass the state's high stakes test - MCAS - in order to graduate. Based on patterns emerging from other states, Massachusetts dropout rates - already too high - are about to get worse. With 33% of the state's Latino students and 24% of the state's African American students entering ninth grade at risk for dropping out before graduation, many schools and districts now face a crisis of growing proportions.

Massachusetts dropout patterns paint a picture of growing gaps between the educational "haves" and "have nots." Those who face the greatest challenges in life are increasingly at risk of leaving school with less formal schooling.

High-stakes testing betrays the most vulnerable students in the Commonwealth. Far from fixing the problem of students who graduate without skills, linking MCAS scores to graduation threatens to push the most vulnerable students out of school altogether. As MCAS policies narrow opportunity for individual students, they also jeopardize the future welfare of students' communities.

What do we know about the Massachusetts dropout picture in the era of MCAS?

- Higher dropout rates are a *predictable consequence* of high stakes testing. African American, Latino, and urban students, already dramatically over-represented among students who both drop out and fail MCAS, bear the greatest cost of such testing.
- As MCAS testing fuels higher grade retention rates, students are already dropping out earlier in their high school years, with dropout numbers rising the middle grades.
- While students already at risk are most endangered, many good students who work hard, pass their courses, and aspire to post-secondary education - but who fail MCAS - will join the ranks of school dropouts.
- As more students leave school with less education, and as fewer reenroll in school, entire communities will need to address the needs of a growing population of young adults whose levels of educational attainments exclude them from many employment and educational opportunities.
- While MCAS drives more students out of school, lack of state funding and the absence of leadership for dropout prevention constitute an abandonment of the state's most vulnerable students and their schools.

When large numbers of students already conclude that "school is not for me," what are the chances that the threat of withholding a diploma will bully similarly vulnerable students into higher test scores and turn them into "graduates with skills?"

Widening gaps, growing vulnerability

In the 1998-99 school year, 9,188 Massachusetts students dropped out of school. According to the Massachusetts Department of Education's annual reports, "Dropout Rates in Massachusetts Public Schools," this is the highest number of students dropping out since 1993. Overall, the Department of Education (DOE) projects that 14% of the Class of 2002 will drop out before graduation.

Multi-year trends are clear: As those students most likely to attend schools with fewest resources for learning encounter a policy that requires particular MCAS scores for graduation, many will turn away from school earlier in their high school careers. Analysis of data available in DOE reports highlights a growing problem for the state overall and particular districts.

- ***African American and Latino students are dramatically over-represented among dropouts in Massachusetts.*** *Although only 17% of Massachusetts students in grades 9-12 are Latino or African American, 40% of those dropping out of school are Latino or African American.* In 1998-99, Latino students made up 9% of all the state's students enrolled in grades 9-12 but represented 24% of all dropouts. African American students made up 8% of students enrolled in grades 9-12 but comprised 16% of all dropouts.
- ***Among students who drop out, the proportion of Latino and African American students is growing.*** Although the population of Latino and African American students in Massachusetts high schools has consistently remained at 17% for four years, the percentage of Latino and African American students represented in the dropout population has increased. In 1995-96 and 1996-97, Latino and African American students already comprised 34% of all dropouts. This percentage rose to 36% in 1997-98. *By 1999, 40% of the dropouts were Latino and African American.*
- ***Among students who drop out, the proportion of students dropping out with less than a 9th grade education is increasing.*** In 1995-96, 1996-97, and 1997-98, 23% of dropouts left school in 9th grade. *By 1999, 25% of the state's dropouts came from the ninth grade.* The state does not include the number of students dropping out before reaching high school in its official reports. *However, data obtained for particular high risk urban schools indicate growing numbers of students are leaving school with less than a ninth grade education.*
- ***The percentage of 9th grade dropouts who reenroll in school is declining.*** Students who leave school in ninth grade are increasingly out of school for good. In 1995-96, 21% of 9th grade dropouts reenrolled in school; in 1996-97, 15% reenrolled; in 1997-98, 16% reenrolled. *By 1999, only 14% of 9th graders who dropped out reen rolled in school.*
- ***Students from urban districts comprise a disproportionate number of the state's high school dropouts, and the percentage of dropouts from a small number of urban communities is growing.*** Boston, Springfield, Worcester, New Bedford, Lowell, and Lawrence together consistently enroll 15% of all the state's high schools students. In 1996-97, 32% of all dropouts came from these districts; 1997-98, 35% of all dropouts from grades 9, 10, 11, and 12 came from these districts. *By 1999, 39% of all dropouts came from these six districts. Of all the 1999 dropouts, 18.4% came from Boston alone, up from 15% in 1996.* Half (51%) of Massachusetts dropouts now come from only 14 districts, mostly urban.

As thousands of students receive "Failing" MCAS scores, the "holding power" schools offer the most vulnerable students is stretched to the breaking point. In the face of dwindling hope they will pass MCAS, fewer dropouts will return to school. With no state resources available for dropout prevention, entire communities inherit a set of social problems that persist for years to come.

***MCAS* Alert** is a publication of the National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest) and the Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education (CARE). This is the first in a series of research reports that examine the interplay between MCAS, educational opportunity, and achievement.
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The predictable push-out consequences of high-stakes testing

The Massachusetts dropout problem is no puzzle. Reporting findings from a major national longitudinal database, University of Wisconsin researchers Gary Wehlage and Robert Rutter (1986) have emphasized, ***"The process of becoming a dropout is complex because the act of rejecting an institution as fundamental to the society as school must also be accompanied by the belief that the institution has rejected the person."*** Repeating a grade, punitive attendance practices, school exclusion, and labeling and placement in low-track classes are among the school experiences that contribute to a student's belief that "school is not for me."

High-stakes testing also sabotages schools' "holding power," especially in schools enrolling large numbers of vulnerable students. Researchers from the National Board for Educational Testing and Public Policy (Clarke, Haney, & Madaus, 2000) summarize these correlations:

- Nine of the ten states with the highest dropout rates in the country tie test scores to decisions about graduation. In contrast, none of the ten states with the lowest dropout rates have such a policy.
- Data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS:88) indicates that high-stakes testing in grade 8 contributes to higher dropout rates *before tenth grade* among students attending schools with proportionately higher numbers of low-income students.
- In Florida, a study of students' tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade records found that the likelihood of dropping out increased significantly among students with moderate grades (1.5-2.5 on a 4-point scale) who failed the state's graduation test.

Likewise, an exhaustive study of Texas enrollment data over 20 years found that disparities in grade progression and graduation were exacerbated just prior to and throughout the years of testing for graduation in that state (Haney, 2000). Specifically:

- During the first year of Texas graduation testing in 1991, the proportion of students progressing from ninth grade to graduation on time declined dramatically, a drop 50% greater for African American and Latino students than for white students. Although white students have recovered "normal" pre-testing progression rates, African American and Latino students have not done so, leaving wider gaps in educational attainment between white students and African American and Latino students. Sixth graders in Texas are now less likely to reach grade 12 than in the years prior to high stakes testing; only 70% of African American and Latino sixth graders do so.

Overall, research suggests that high-stakes testing policies set the stage for higher dropout rates. Among vulnerable students in particular, high-stakes testing may exert a push-out effect so that students who would otherwise be expected to complete school instead experience greater chances of leaving without a diploma.

Placing good students at risk: "A set up to tell you you're stupid"

Faced with "Failing" MCAS scores, many good students who play by the rules, pass their courses, and contribute to their schools begin to doubt their academic identity and ability to complete high school, let alone post-secondary education.

Allyson is 16, an energetic sports-lover and B+ student at her local high school, with a special drive to succeed in school. "My brother dropped out, and my sister, too. I want to be the first person in my family to graduate from high school," she says.

By all accounts, Allyson will realize her dream and graduate in 2002 with an admirable academic and extracurricular record. Enrolled in her school's "high level" classes in English and History in her sophomore year, she earned "A"s on specific assignments and maintained an overall "B+" average. A passionate

athlete, she is a disciplined runner. A regular volunteer at her local shelter for homeless adults, she also works at the local shopping mall every other weekend and during the summer. She aims for a college degree and imagines herself as an entrepreneur, managing her own day care center or auto repair business.

Allyson has taken MCAS twice, in eighth and tenth grades. Despite her record as a good student, she says, "I thought about dropping out around the time we took MCAS [in May 2000]. If the test counted for me to graduate, like it's going to this year, I probably would have. But I knew if I could just get through those hours of testing, it would be over, and I wouldn't have to think about it again."

Although her MCAS scores will not "count" for graduation, Allyson takes MCAS very seriously. Three months into her ninth grade, Allyson received her grade 8 scores: "Needs Improvement" (230) in English, "Failing" (200) in Math. That year, her school assigned her and others who had "failed" in eighth grade to daily "MCAS classes" where each quarter's curriculum focused on a different section of the MCAS. Allyson put a lot of faith in these classes: She says, "I worked so hard for my MCAS classes, I spent a lot of time in the library, hoping to do well on the test." As of September 2000, she has not yet received her scores, but she says, "I'm fairly certain that I failed at least one section."

Allyson is thankful that her class is not the first for whom MCAS scores will "count" toward graduation. "A lot of students who don't pass MCAS are going to drop out next year," she predicts. As for her classmates, she says, "MCAS makes students think they are stupid."

Do high stakes tests motivate all students?

In a major report published by the American Educational Research Association, researchers Thomas Kellaghan, George Madaus, and Anastasia Raczek (1996) asked the questions: Do high-stakes tests motivate all students? and What do tests motivate students to do? They found that high-stakes testing can actually undermine motivation, especially for students who already have a tenuous hold on schooling. Even for motivated students, examinations may not lead to the desirable outcomes - higher levels of achievement and problem-solving, intrinsic motivation, general competence, or self-determination - that are key to nurturing an informed citizenry and a skilled workforce.

Good students we interviewed around the state say they value school. Eighth or ninth grade was the "best year ever" for some. Still, many see MCAS as a "mental block" that some believe will be difficult to surmount. Some believe that MCAS is "a plan to stop city kids from going to college." Many see MCAS as a "set up to tell you you're stupid."

Sylvie belongs to the Massachusetts Class of 2003, the first class required to pass MCAS before graduating. Friendly and reserved at the same time, Sylvie describes herself as serious, hardworking, and creative, both in and outside of school. She sings in her church chorus, attending rehearsals faithfully, and she volunteers at her church convention.

Sylvie has consistently had a "B+" grade average in school. She loves to read, and her favorite book is the award-winning Push. *In eighth grade, she won her school's award for good grades and behavior. In 9th grade, her grades improved further. She cites her math skills as a particular strength, and her report card shows "A"s in both Math and English.*

Still, Sylvie was not overly confident about MCAS, and in eighth grade, she regularly stayed after school to attend the MCAS prep classes her favorite teacher offered. Despite her effort, she scored "Needs Improvement" in English and "low Fail" in Math. She now worries about how she will fare when MCAS "counts." Describing testing as "horrible because it's long and confusing," she says, "College students do well on these questions." In light of her MCAS scores, she believes her teachers now see her in terms of what she does not *know rather than what she does know. "Teachers always liked me," she says, "But MCAS made us look stupid. Most of the things I learned weren't on the MCAS." "I'm afraid that I won't graduate," she adds. "I don't know what you have to know to do well. MCAS made me want to drop out."*

The MCAS dilemma: "Feel stupid" or leave

Good students we interviewed understand that the *lack* of a diploma is a disaster. Still, many who have already failed MCAS once do not view the "opportunity" to repeat that failure as a strong motivator for working harder.

Given the choice of retaking a test that makes them "feel stupid" and the prospect of repeated humiliating failures, many students are likely to dismiss the possibility of passing "some day" and bow out of testing - and school - altogether. Predicting the reactions of classmates who fail, one tenth grader says, "Some [students] will stay, but one day they're going .o give up." Another reports, "A lot of kids are going to get discouraged. Some will keep trying, but a lot will struggle to get to school." One says, "I'll go back to Barbados. I'll get my diploma there."

Nor do students we interviewed have much faith in retesting. Indeed, testing conditions they have already encountered encourage neither hope or effort: "Everyone's in the cafeteria bunched together on cold chairs. You can't do your best that way," explain students from one Boston high school.

Policy makers have sold MCAS as a necessary "stick" to get students to work hard and take school seriously. But contrary to policy rhetoric, for a portion of students who are already working hard, MCAS is as likely to drive them away from school as to motivate them to work harder.

Districts to watch: Where weak "holding power" increases the risk

Students failing MCAS are at greatest risk of dropping out in districts with weak holding power, where dropout rates are higher than the state average and are increasing. Students are most at risk where:

- the 1998-99 annual dropout rate currently stands at 4.6% or higher, one percentage point or more above the state average of 3.6%;
- the annual rate has remained above the state average for three years;
- the annual rate has increased steadily for three years, reaching 4.6% or higher in 1998-99.

Districts with weak holding power need resources and assistance to develop dropout prevention efforts that reform school practices and provide personalized support for individual students. In 1998-99, 30 districts in particular needed such assistance.

- Seven Massachusetts districts fit all three criteria that indicate districts with weak holding power. They include Boston, Carver, Everett, Grafton, Lawrence, Dennis-Yarmouth, and Assabet Valley Technical High School.
- In 17 additional districts, the annual dropout rate was 4.6% or above in 1999 *and* the annual dropout rate has been above the state average for the past three or more years. These include Chelsea, Easthampton, Fairhaven, Fall River, Greenfield, Holyoke, New Bedford, Pittsfield, Plymouth, Somerville, Southbridge, Springfield, West Springfield, Worcester, Adams-Cheshire, Freetown-Lakeville, and Ralph C. Maher.
- In six additional districts, the annual dropout rate was 4.6% or more in 1999 *and* had increased for three consecutive years to reach that high rate. These include Holbrook, Lowell, Revere, Waltham, Gateway Regional, and Quaboag Regional.

The policy of linking MCAS scores to graduation is a time bomb set to go off in the form of higher dropout rates. "Failing" students in districts with weak holding power may feel the reverberations most immediately, but in the end, entire communities experience the fallout.

The coming "train wreck:" Asleep at the switch

Despite foreseeable increases in dropout rates, the Massachusetts DOE has failed to take even the most basic steps to anticipate, monitor, and address the impact of MCAS on the state's dropout problem, especially in relation to the state's most vulnerable students.

- State leadership is lacking to address the coming "train wreck." The Massachusetts Department of Education has no staff person responsible for leading dropout prevention efforts at the state level.
- The Department of Education's budget provides no funding directed toward dropout prevention. Funding for "remediation" is no substitute for support for reforms and programs designed specifically to lower dropout rates.

The Massachusetts DOE's dropout reports are inadequate for monitoring the impact of MCAS on the state's most vulnerable students.

- Massachusetts has not reported dropout data for special education students since 1994-95.
- Massachusetts does not report dropout rates for students learning English as a second language and has never done so.
- Massachusetts does not report dropout numbers for students who drop out of school *before* reaching ninth grade. These students are not counted in official dropout reports.

In the absence of dropout data disaggregated for the most vulnerable groups, including students with disabilities, students who are learning English as a second language, and students who turn 16 in the middle grades, the legislature and community cannot assess the impact of MCAS on dropout trends in Massachusetts.

In the era of high-stakes testing, the DOE must assume responsibility for addressing, reporting, and monitoring state and district dropout rates in a manner that fully accounts for the dropout problem statewide and in individual communities.

Choosing equity

The state should immediately suspend the policy of linking MCAS scores to high school graduation. States, districts, and schools make choices regarding the policies and practices they adopt. To choose current policy is to choose higher dropout rates.

The state must renew its commitment to dropout prevention. The state should ensure that leadership responsibility is assigned within the Department of Education to develop an overall dropout prevention strategy, allocate funds for programs and technical assistance targeted to districts with weak holding power, and improve state monitoring and reporting of dropout rates, focusing on the impact of MCAS on the state's most vulnerable students.

The state should begin immediately to work with local districts and professional associations to design a multi-faceted assessment system that will improve learning for all students. Such a system should strengthen accountability by monitoring students' basic skills statewide and engage learning by promoting local approaches grounded in real student work. **(See CARE's proposal for an Authentic Accountability System at http://www.fairtest.org/ARN/masspage.html.)**

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